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Crime networks in Vietnamese diasporas. The Czech Republic case

Miroslav Nožina

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Abstract The study seeks to analyse the structure and “modus operandi” of crime networks in the Czech Republic’s Vietnamese diaspora. Vietnamese criminality in the country has roots in communist era. After the democratic changes at the end of 80s, it has been representing dynamically developing phenomena, penetrating not only the local Vietnamese emigrant community but the state apparatus as well. Actually, the Vietnamese criminal underground lives in a specific symbiosis with the local Asian emigrant community, where legal and illegal activities are frequently merged together. “Respectable men” who have features of both legal businessmen and criminal bosses are the main actors in these processes. They create parallel power structures in closed worlds of Asian emigrants.

Introduction

In the last few decades, and especially since 1975, the numbers of Vietnamese living outside Vietnam have steadily increased. Of the three million *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese), more than 1.5 million people of Vietnamese origin live in the United States, 600,000 in Cambodia, and 152,000 in Canada. Australia hosts 157,000 Vietnamese, France, which has the oldest Vietnamese diaspora in Europe, reports 250,000 Vietnamese residents. There are up to 150,000 Vietnamese emigrants in the Russian Federation, Germany reports 84,000, The United Kingdom 35,000, and Norway 18,000 [25]. 30,000 to 50,000 Vietnamese have been living in Poland [9, 14]. Data from the Czech Republic put the number of Vietnamese at 45, 000 although it’s believed that the real figure is closer to 50,000 or 60,000 [22: 187].

Overseas Vietnamese can be generally divided into three distinct categories. The first category consists of people who have been living outside of Vietnam prior to

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1975 (mainly in Cambodia, China, Laos, France, and Canada — Québec). They are one of the best-integrated non-western immigrant groups in Western countries. To the second category belong the *Việt Kiều* who escaped Vietnam after 1975 as refugees and their descendants. They usually reside in industrialised countries in North America, Western Europe and Australia. The third category consists of Vietnamese working and studying in the former communist countries that opted to stay there and established a base for new Vietnamese immigrants arriving after the democratic changes at the end of the 80s. Together with newcomers, they created strong criminal networks there. This category is found mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic, and will be discussed in the following text.

Most of the Vietnamese emigrants have been looking for an opportunity to improve their lives and to ensure a better future for their children. However, waves of Vietnamese emigration imported a new type of crime to the host countries as well. Vietnamese crime has been engaged in a broad spectrum of criminal activities: economic crime, smuggling of people, trade in people and prostitution, violent crime, robberies, counterfeiting activities, trafficking in weapons and drugs, etc., introducing new “modus operandi” of criminal activities to the host countries. Because many Vietnamese communities abroad have a tendency to isolate themselves from the social and administrative systems in their new countries of residence, it is very difficult to investigate criminal offences and to introduce efficient legal and preventive measures against Vietnamese crime there. The cultural and social isolation frequently leads to criminal stigmatisation of Vietnamese diasporas as a whole.

It is difficult to find the line between the “legal” sphere and the criminal underworld in Vietnamese communities abroad. These two spheres live in a dialectical unity. It is impossible to identify their roots without an understanding of the structure, functional mechanisms and culture of Vietnamese communities.

The way of co-existence of the “legal” and “illegal” sphere in the world of the Vietnamese diaspora is the main theme discussed in this article, based on research realised in the Czech Republic. It argues that legal and illegal activities live in a dialectical unity in Vietnamese communities. The unity is demonstrated in a historical perspective (before the democratic changes of 1989), in the processes of the establishment of the Vietnamese diaspora, and in the life of the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora in the Czech Republic. A lot of criminal activities are just cubes in the complicated mosaic of Vietnamese community life in the country. Ability to break this unity is the main condition for efficient suppression of the Vietnamese criminal activities.

In the first part of the article, the historical roots of Vietnamese immigration to the former Czechoslovakia and the beginnings of the Vietnamese presence in the Czech criminal underworld are discussed. The ability of Vietnamese shadow businessmen and criminal delinquents to operate even in the conditions of a closed totalitarian state in Central Europe is demonstrated.

The second part describes the situation after the 1989 “Velvet Revolution”, when fundamental political and social changes opened doors to a new wave of Vietnamese immigration and to further penetration of Vietnamese crime into the Czech Republic. Transfers were either organised on a semi-legal basis (exploiting gaps in the Czech immigration laws) or on an illegal basis (using counterfeit documents, smuggling of

people across the green line, etc.). As a result of the transfers, one of Europe's strongest Vietnamese diasporas has been established in the Czech Republic.

The third part focuses on the social structure of the Vietnamese diaspora. It describes civilian and criminal branches of the diaspora and the patterns of their co-existence.

In many aspects, the Czech experience is the same as that in many other countries where Vietnamese crime develops activities. On the other hand, a lot of specialities spreading from different historical developments, economic conditions and social experiences exist in the Czech Republic. The differences are clearly visible, especially in relation to the Vietnamese diasporas in Western Europe and the U.S. A. Further comparative research is needed in this area.

Theoretical background

It is important to differentiate genuine, "traditional" Asian organised crime from networks of crime. As Fickenauer and Chin stress, the basic difference is that the "traditional" crime groups are pre-existing, while crime networks are developed in response to criminal opportunities. [6: 13, 14, 19].

In Asia and Europe, there are traditional criminal organisations such as the Triads, Yakuza, the jaotou, the jao phro, the tongs, and organised gangs that indeed have a name, a turf, a hierarchical structure, and restricted membership and use violence to monopolise their illegal markets. [6: 13, 14]. Some of the traditional Asian organised crime groups have been in existence for centuries, and they are most likely to continue to exist. According to Zhang and Chin, these groups usually have a strong attachment to their territory and environment, and as a result, they are handicapped in taking advantage of criminal opportunities that are transnational in nature [34].

But there are also networks (many networks) of Asian people who are involved in organised crime on an ad hoc basis that do not have a group name, a territory, or a structure. They are more likely to emerge around specific criminal opportunities. They act like, and view themselves as, opportunistic business people rather than violent gangsters. Very often, a nuclear or an extended family initiate an operation in response to a new opportunity, and people from the same family, village or at least the same ethnic group who are living in source, transit, and destination countries are recruited to participate as members of the network, which may dissolve after the criminal operation is successfully carried out.

The networks of crime are more flexible on the international scene, frequently dominating Asian crime's operations there in recent years. [6: 19].

The world of diasporas is a favourable environment for the development of criminal networks' activities. Among common features typical for diasporas, as described by Cohen¹ [3: 26, 180–187], several include crime risk factors — a strong

¹ (1) Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically; (2) alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade; (3) a collective memory and myth about the homeland; (4) an idealization of the supposed ancestral home; (5) a return movement; (6) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; (7) a troubled relations with the host society, (8) a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries; (9) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries.

family, regional and ethnic bonds expanding from home countries to diasporas favourable for the creation and development of crime networks (the so-called “village mentality” of emigrants), language and culture barriers, troubled relations with host societies supporting isolation of emigrants and the creation of parallel power structures, unsatisfied expectations of a distinctive enriching life, return strategies and the feeling of the “transitoriness” of the stage abroad, leading to exploitation of resources in host countries regardless of the limits of law, etc.

The situation in Vietnamese diasporas is not an exception. The function of criminal networks there and their co-existence with other members of diasporas are based on the Vietnamese “village mentality” and emigrants’ exploitation strategies transferred to the Western cultural space combined with traditional patterns of Asian criminal societies.

In relation to the Vietnamese traditional mentality, G. Hickey quotes a homogeneity in social expectations characterised by a strong motivation for economic gains, strong self-consciousness, disregarding (if not disdaining) the outside world, and an accent on family and social bonds [11: 276–278]. A traditional Vietnamese considers himself not as an independent individual but as a component in a system of relationships: as a member of the family, or the village, or in the case of criminals, a member of the gang [18: 21]. The Vietnamese researcher Le Xuan Khoa tells us: “The tendency of Indochinese refugees to cluster together and to form community organisations can be traced back to a traditional pattern common to all agrarian societies in Southeast Asia”. Individualism, which, in a sense, is the foundation of Western, especially American, society is to the Vietnamese “...something inconceivable, because his primary sense of identity is so indissolubly a component within a broader, collective ego structure”, i.e. the totality of a family or social unity. This phenomenon is further strengthened in language and in a culturally different environment, as the Western world is for the Indochinese newcomers. “Being cut off from their families, villages and countries,” writes Le, “Indochinese refugees feel an urgent need to cluster together and to form community organisations as secondary sources of security.” Some writers call it the “village mentality” [18: 21].

Another strong phenomenon is the feeling of “transitoriness” of the Vietnamese emigrants’ phases of life in the host countries. It supports exploitation strategies directed to gain the maximal profit as soon as possible — frequently regardless of the limits of law. The article argues that the “transitoriness” is fictive in many aspects.

The “village mentality” and exploitation strategies definitely extend to the criminal fringe — and thus, they are the foundation not only of Vietnamese communities in Europe but of every Vietnamese criminal network or organised crime group.

For traditional Asian criminal organisations, a deep penetration of society and a frequent merging of illegal and legal activities are characteristic. We can register legal (civilian) and criminal branches also in the life of the Vietnamese diasporas. The branches are not isolated but closely tied by many bridges and temporary contacts. A broad shadow zone of semi-legal and illegal activities exists between them.

The two branches are connected mainly in the “boss” or “honoured man” of the society. The bosses develop illegal activities through criminal networks of assistants, enforcers, and corrupt clerks. On the other hand, these men pose as serious businessmen and frequently have good contacts with business elites in host countries. They are respected in Vietnamese communities for their ability to solve many of their problems. They create parallel power structures there based on economic power, clientism, and contacts with the criminal underworld.

Not only economic pressure and expected profits but also a solidarity born from the village mentality and the complicated network of mutual “gratitudes” are the basic motors of the engagement of many Vietnamese emigrants who are basically without criminal backgrounds in many criminal activities. Rejection of a request for a counter-service for a respectable man is not frequent in Vietnamese communities.

The role of various criminal delinquents and violent gangs in the scheme of Vietnamese community life and the roots of the tolerance in relation to them are clearly visible in the light of these facts.

Information sources and research methods

Especially after 1975, a wide range of studies has been published on the problem of Vietnamese diaporas in Western countries [5, 8, 12, 28, 30]. The communist and post-communist space in Eastern Europe is less covered, with more extensive research starting here in the 1990s [2, 7, 9, 10, 33].

From the end of the 1980s, several research projects were realised in the Czech Republic as well. The majority of these studies deals with the social and economic impacts of Vietnamese migration. [1, 13, 16, 32].² Criminological studies focus on specific criminal activities such as the trade in drugs³ [25], trafficking in women [27], etc. Crime networks are discussed only marginally.

In fulfilling the purpose of the study, it was necessary to pursue a variety of research initiatives. In 1992, the Institute of International Relations (IIR), a Prague independent research centre, began a research into international organised crime (the so-called Internationalisation of Crime Research Programme) in the framework of international security studies. Its projects examine the geographical expansion, structure and impact of international organised crime activities in the Czech Republic and the role of the Czech Republic in international criminal networks. They also estimate future trends in

² Unpublished manuscripts: Brouček, S. (2002). *Vietnamské etnikum v lokálním prostředí české majority* (Vietnamese Ethnic Group in the Local Environment of the Czech Majority). Text vědeckého projektu RB1/1/01 zadaného Ministerstvem zahraničních věcí České republiky. (The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs Research Project RB1/1/01) Praha; Martínková, Š. (2007). *Vietnamské etnikum, jeho sociabilita a sociální sítě v prostředí Prahy* (Vietnamese Ethnic Group, its Sociability, and Social Networks). Praha.

Unpublished theses: Jirasová, M (2000), *Vietnamci očima české společnosti* (Vietnamese in the Eyes of Czech Society). Praha: Charles University; Kocourek, J. (2001), *Historie příchodu a působení příslušníků vietnamské národnosti na území ČSR (resp. ČSSR) v letech 1950 až 1975* (History of Arrival and Activity of the Vietnamese Ethnic Group's Members on the CSR Territory (Respectively the CSSR Territory) in the Years 1950 – 1975). Praha: Charles University; Martínková, Š. (2003), *Vietnamská menšina v Praze* (Vietnamese Minority in Prague). Praha: Charles University; Ngo Van Le (1989), *Vietnamští pracující v Československu* (Vietnamese Workers in Czechoslovakia). Praha: Charles University; Poulik, M. (2006), *Národnostní menšiny — aneb proč se nemluví o Vietnamcích* (National Minorities — Why Vietnamese are not Discussed). Brno: Masaryk University; Soukeníková, R. (2004), *Vietnamské etnikum v České republice* (The Vietnamese Ethnic Group in the Czech Republic). Brno: Masaryk University; Štěpánková, K. (2006), *Etnická ekonomika: případová studie vietnamské ekonomické enklávy Sapa v Praze — Libuši* (Ethnic Economy: A Case Study of the Vietnamese Economic Enclave Sapa in Prague — Libuše). Praha: Charles University; Trung Ta Minh (2002), *Podnikání a život Vietnamců v Chebu* (The Business and Life of Vietnamese in Cheb). Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita (West Bohemian University).

³ Unpublished thesis: Hammer, M., *Problematika drogové kriminality páchané menšinovými etniky na území ČR* (Problems of Drug Criminality Committed by Minority Ethnic Groups on the CR Territory). Brno: Masaryk University, 2007.

the development of the Czech criminal underworld and the impact of these international criminal activities on the Czech economy and society [21–24].

Vietnamese organised crime studies became a part of the IIR programme's research project International Organised Crime in the Czech Republic in 1999 – 2002. The project was realised mainly through cooperation with officials of the Czech police and security forces. Together with analysis of relevant documents, a method of structured interviews with members of security forces dealing with the problem of the Vietnamese community in everyday practise was employed. [18–20] In 2007, the project was further enlarged, and new data were collected from the Czech security sources, NGO organisations (mainly La Strada), and from the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. The basic idea of the new research was to cross the lines of the formerly strict “police” views and to provide a more open understanding of the problem by taking into account views from within the Vietnamese community. Because of it, ethnographic methods of structured interviews and participant observation were employed. As a part of it, a “snowball” method was used. The method is based on the observation of communities through its selected members as middlemen.

To penetrate more deeply to the Vietnamese community, 4 field project assistants were engaged. All of them were of Vietnamese origin and fluent in both Czech and Vietnamese languages. 1 was born in the Czech Republic, and 3 arrived to Czechia as children and passed through the education system there. 2 field assistants operated in Prague, 1 in Brno and 1 in Cheb, where they collected information on the Vietnamese communities and realised 19 interviews. Of the interviews' respondents, 9 were sellers of goods (including 2 *bo doi*), 2 were owners of restaurants, 1 was an owner of a nightclub, 3 were businessmen, and 2 were juvenile gang members.⁴ The scenario of interviews was loose, accommodated to the actual situation and social backgrounds of the respondents. The main discussed topics were: way of transfer to the Czech Republic, business activities, life expectations, economic and social relations in the Vietnamese community, relations to “respectable men”, relations to *bo dois* and criminal gangs, contacts with the Czech majority, contacts with Vietnamese communities abroad. The interviews were strictly confidential. They contributed mainly to the understanding of the structure and function of criminal networks. Concrete criminal offences were discussed only generally.

Collected field information was analysed and compared with the information coming from other sources.

Historical perspective: beginnings of Vietnamese involvement in the Czech criminal world

To understand the current role of Vietnamese in the Czech criminal world, we must go back to the history of mutual relations between the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The first larger waves of Vietnamese immigrants to the CSSR started to arrive in 1956. The majority of them were war orphans and students. By 1967, there were

⁴ Because of security reasons, the co-workers and respondents from the Vietnamese community and security forces, and also confidential materials, are quoted as “Vietnamese community sources” (VCS) and the “Czech Police Sources” (CPS) in the text.

2100 Vietnamese workers and apprentices in the CSSR.⁵ From the beginning of the 70s, approximately 500 Vietnamese students per year were prepared for studies in Czech secondary schools and universities with stipends from the *Ústřední výbor Komunistické strany Československa* (Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party), *Ústřední rada odborů* (Central Trade Union Council), and the Czechoslovak government [22, 31: 189].

Czechoslovakia was also one of the main sources of weapons and military materials for the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong in the course of the Indochina war.⁶ Shortly after the war, economic and political relations between the two countries further grew in importance in the framework of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), which was created to support economic co-operation between the countries of the Soviet bloc. Czechoslovakia exported industrial goods and investment complexes to Vietnam in exchange for raw materials and agriculture products.

At the beginning of the 80s, the Vietnamese government, in an effort to pay its war debts and fill in the growing gap in export-import relations, started to export a Vietnamese labour force to the CSSR. Thousand of Vietnamese were transported to the Czech Republic in the framework of a so-called “assistance programme for a suffering Vietnam”.

The project was carefully organised by the Vietnamese and Czechoslovak governments. Young Vietnamese, usually of the age 18–20 (and therefore not former soldiers from the Indochina war, as is frequently suggested in the press) received basic language and professional education in an initial phase in Vietnam lasting between 3 and 6 months. They were then transported to the CSSR, where they continued in their language studies for another 3–6 months in seven study centres. After that, they were distributed from the study centres into textile, chemical and industrial factories and agricultural cooperatives across the Czechoslovak territory. Their contracts usually lasted 4 years (sometimes prolonged to 7 years). Their professional education continued in new places according to the requirements of their employers [22, 31: 189]. Although official figures about the numbers of Vietnamese workers have never been published, it is estimated that between 70,000 and 120,000 young Vietnamese went through the system of “voluntary labour” in the CSSR in the course of the 80s. Around 30,000 were living in Czechoslovakia at any moment within the period 1980–1989. In 1990, when the Czechoslovak — Vietnamese labour agreement expired, there were still 20,000 Vietnamese residents in the country.⁷ Some of them established themselves very well in Czechoslovakia, married local girls and learned the Czech language perfectly. These people became the base for a new wave of immigrants coming to the Czech Republic after 1989.

As a whole, the program worked more or less well in the course of the first half of the 80s. The first waves of students and workers were composed of carefully selected young people with communist backgrounds (i.e. members of the communist youth organisation and the communist party). They were nearly exclusively of North

⁵ Brouček, S. (2002): 11–12.

⁶ *The plastic explosive SEMTEX, widely used by terrorists all over the world, was developed by the Czechoslovak company Synthesia Semtín on the basis of a Vietnamese order in 1964 — it was an analogue of the American explosive C4.*

⁷ Brouček, S. (2002): 12–13.

and Central Vietnamese origin (Son La, Dienbienphu, Hanoi, Langson, Haiphong, etc.) — from areas under a long time communist influence. In the second half of the 80s, the program gradually declined and both sides started to widely abuse the situation. Czechoslovakia has employed Vietnamese workers in unpopular and low paying jobs, and the Vietnamese co-ordinators of the programme were engaged in the organisation of paid migration and black market activities. Especially in the second half of the 80s, the “quality” of workers gradually declined because of low interest among potential volunteers, and selection became formal. Some rumours circulated at the time that the Vietnamese police were collecting new “volunteers” among juvenile delinquents on Hanoi and Saigon streets [22: 190].

It is hard to estimate when the first Vietnamese criminal networks were established in the CSSR because the Czechoslovak government and security forces closed their eyes to the problem for political reasons. It was probably in the first half of 80s. During its beginnings, it was connected to the small-scale entrepreneurial activities of Vietnamese workers endeavouring to improve their incomes. The workers received only 40–50 % of their real wages directly in the CSSR. The rest of the money was partly exchanged into Vietnamese currency, dongs, and paid to their families in Vietnam in the form of small monthly contributions and as a special final bonus after coming back home; a considerable part of it was used by the Vietnamese government to “cover workers’ travel expenses”⁸ — in other words, to cover Vietnamese foreign debt. As a result, the living standard of the Vietnamese workers was not too high. A lot of them consequently looked for additional incomes. However, uncontrolled activities were officially interdicted, and the workers were allowed to work only in their assigned employments and under the control of their supervisors. Consequently, they turned to semi-legal or illegal activities in the Czech black market. The Vietnamese discovered early that there exists a big interest in “western” fashion commodities as clothes, digital watches and electronics in the Czech society. Because of this, they started to manufacture jeans and clothes with fake trademarks of western companies from stolen textile materials produced in the CSSR factories for export. The second main source of their additional income became their importation of goods, especially watches and cheap electronics with fake brand names from Asia.

These originally small-scale entrepreneurial activities accelerated when workers’ group supervisors and employees of the Vietnamese embassy in Prague entered the business. According to eyewitnesses, in the second half of the 80s, special aeroplanes used to land at Prague’s Old Ruzyně Airport (used for reception of foreign delegations, military purposes, charter flights, etc.) loaded with Asian goods. This went on under the supervision of the Vietnamese embassy employees. The goods were immediately reloaded into lorries and transported out of the airport without any contact with Czech customs. After a few days, they appeared on the black market.⁹

In the opposite direction, it was mainly bicycles, small motorcycles and sewing machines that were transported in plains officially chartered for transportation of workers coming back to Vietnam. It is not clear how the commodities with fake

⁸ VCS (1999).

⁹ Interview D. M., former employee of the Prague Ruzyně Airport, 14 February 1999.

western trademarks produced in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, etc. were smuggled to Vietnam, but the black market trade networks between the Asian countries and Czechoslovakia via Hanoi have lasted for years.¹⁰ The 1989 democratic changes in Eastern Europe opened doors for further acceleration of the trade.

Establishment of Vietnamese diaspora: Democratic changes in the 90s and transfers of Vietnamese into and across Czech territory

After the 1989 “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, the situation in the society changed dramatically. Along with democratic freedoms, the immense changes after 1989 brought highly undesirable side effects. By opening up its state borders, illegal transport of goods and people through the Czech Republic accelerated. Vast economic transformation and the sudden creation of a free market presented many opportunities to criminal “businesses”.

The Czech legal system was only gradually and with great difficulty amended and adapted to democratic standards and the necessities of a market economy; the justice and police apparatus was fundamentally reconstructed; initially the police were inexperienced in the investigation of organised crime. The weakly organised local underworld represented little competition to the ravenous, highly professional groups from abroad. As a result, the creation of transnational criminal organisations in the Czech territory was quick and efficient. Practically all the main transnational criminal groupings from the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, Italy and other European countries, as well as Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, established themselves in the Czech Republic within two years of the democratic change. The main motor of organised crime activities was not the domestic underworld but criminal organisations coming from abroad.

The Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic was deeply affected by these changes. Relations between the Czech Republic and Vietnam were severed, and the interest of the transforming Czech industry and agriculture in Vietnamese workers declined sharply. On the basis of already existing agreements, some new students and workers were sent to the Czech Republic up until 1992, but new contracts were not concluded [22: 191–192].

With the end of their stipends and contracts, the students and workers were pressed to return home. The Czech government also decided to pay reimbursement to Vietnamese workers willing to come back before the end of their contract. In fact, the majority of them decided to stay in Czechoslovakia or emigrate to the West. The time was favourable for them — immigration laws were weak, and the police and security forces were partly paralysed. According to Czech law, it was very easy to arrange a business licence and obtain a permanent residence permit on the basis of this. The gap in immigration laws allowed many contract workers and former students to avoid returning to Vietnam and create business companies in the Czech Republic. In 1990, there were still approximately 20,000 Vietnamese living in the

¹⁰ CPS: interview M. K., officer of the Útvar pro odhalování organizovaného zločinu Policie ČR (The Czech Police Organised Crime Unit), 27 May 1999.

country.¹¹ The situation also attracted a new wave of economic refugees from Vietnam.

Patterns of Vietnamese transfers to the Czech Republic changed several times from the beginning of the 90s because of the introduction of new immigration laws, changes in asylum politics and police restrictions. Many of these changes were connected to the preparation of the Czech legal and security system to join the Schengen area in January 2008.

Dominant patterns of Vietnamese immigration have been based on exploiting gaps in the Czech legal system. Therefore, they are “legal” in principle and “semi-legal” in practice. Especially in the case of a subsequent transfer to a western country, where the immigration is controlled more strongly, the transfer frequently continues on illegal principles.

Patterns of “legal” immigration

Especially at the beginning of the 90s, the situation in the Czech Republic attracted a new wave of economic refugees from Vietnam going to the Czech Republic on tourist visas (issued without problems by the Czech Embassy in Hanoi) and arranging business licences, usually with the assistance of the “old settlers”. The “old settlers” could also ensure the permanent addresses necessary for the newcomers acquiring business licences (in one case, a small suburban house of 3 rooms was discovered in Prague, serving as a permanent address for 60 companies) and receiving permanent residence permits. Because the activities of immigration offices and trade offices were poorly coordinated at the time, the clerks never asked about the type of visa.¹² When this type of immigration started to attract uncomfortable attention from the security services, the strategy was partly changed: the companies of the “old settlers” and members of the “first new wave” started to serve as the base for a “second new wave” of emigrants.

The dominant immigration pattern was as follows in this period. The owner of a Vietnamese or Chinese company (or, sometimes, a Czech company) would announce in the business register the name of his new “business partner” from Vietnam. The new emigrant would arrive in the Czech Republic on the basis of this official invitation from the company and obtain a residence permit on the basis of a business partnership. Then he would create a new company and invite new “business partners”. It was discovered that some Asian companies (often not developing any activities) in the Czech Republic had tens of “partners”. [22: 192–193].

Together with the non-organised “invitation movement”, based on family and territorial ties with the homeland, professional groups started to be engaged in the lucrative business early. Many agencies that specialised in the procurement of visas and the transport of Vietnamese citizens to the Czech Republic were established in Vietnam. These agencies are both unlicensed and licensed.

Unlicensed agencies have been transporting the majority of the new Vietnamese to the Czech Republic in recent years. Very frequently, the agencies are organised by Vietnamese emigrants who already stayed in the Czech Republic before 1989. They

¹¹ CPS: unpublished internal report, the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, May 1999.

¹² CPS: interview K. F., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

are well established in the Czech space, know the local culture, society and laws, and have good contacts with Czech authorities.

The operation of an unlicensed agency as a “family business company” is another frequent pattern. A member of a Vietnamese family living in the Czech Republic returns home to recruit Vietnamese clients interested in journeying to the Czech Republic. He ensures visas and transport for them. The second part of the family living in the CR then ensures the documents necessary for the stage of being a business client in the country, including the business licence.¹³

The clients are recruited on the basis of family and community contacts, recommendations of friends, etc. The recruitment is not anonymous in the majority of the cases. In poor countryside regions of Vietnam, many local people work as beaters for the agencies. They are frequently tied to the agencies’ keepers through family and community networks.¹⁴ Information about advertisements for recruitment in the Vietnamese press was also registered.¹⁵

The agency does not work independently. It uses the services of mediators and corruption networks established around embassies and offices. In the last few years, the Czech Embassy in Hanoi especially has been under constant pressure from these people. The pressure peaked in 2007, before the Czech Republic joined the Schengen system.¹⁶

Rumours in the Vietnamese community in Prague speak about 1000 to 1500 USD being paid for one visa to mediators [29].¹⁷

While the Czech Embassy in Hanoi issued 2167 visas and rejected 191 visas to Vietnamese citizens in 2000, in 2006, the figure was 6208/3768 visas, respectively [29].

The interest of Vietnamese people in a transfer to the Czech Republic assisted by unlicensed agencies is high even when its price ranges from 7000 to 12,000 USD.¹⁸ The final price depends on the amount of “services” given, the client’s familial ties to the agent, his knowledge of the situation, laws and migration procedures, etc. According to respondents, the price is higher if the client is *gà* (“poultry”, respectively naïve, inexperienced). It declines if the client is well informed about the situation or is able to arrange some services independently.¹⁹ In any case, the amount of money that needs to be collected is high in the country, with yearly incomes frequently lower than 150 USD per head (moreover, the economic emigrants often come from the poorest parts of Vietnam). The agencies require money in advance. Usually, a new emigrant has to collect money with the help of his family members living in Vietnam and abroad, sell his house and other property, and run into debt. The *dich vụ* (paid service) of the transfer agency ends at the moment of the emigrant’s arrival. Afterwards, the emigrant has to arrange his livelihood independently.²⁰ Many emigrants begin their stay in the CR in very poor conditions.²¹

¹³ VCS (2007).

¹⁴ VCS (2007).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview K.T., employee of the Czech Embassy in Hanoi, 24 February 2008.

¹⁷ VCS (2007).

¹⁸ CPS: interview M. K., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 27 May 1999.

¹⁹ VCS (2007).

²⁰ Martinková, Š. (2007).

²¹ VCS (2007).

The situation is better in the case of licenced labour agencies, although the conditions of their labour contracts are also tough. The agencies are engaged in exporting Vietnamese workers to the Czech Republic, thereby continuing in the older activities of the Vietnamese and Czechoslovak governments. The workers are selected on the basis of tenders advertised in the Vietnamese press. Afterwards, they have to pay around 7500 USD of the entrance fee and absolve a short (usually 2 months) language course in Hanoi. The one-way airplane ticket to Prague is included in the price. The labour agency is able to arrange a loan for the contracted workers to cover their entrance fee and sign contracts with Czech factories, ensuring them a minimal salary of 650 USD per month.²² The living conditions of these workers in the CR are frequently poor, it takes them 1–3 years to cover their initial debts.²³ The amount of workers and the length of their stay in the CR are usually limited by the terms of the business licence.²⁴

Another problem are fake labour agencies presenting themselves as licenced in Vietnam. These agencies are frequently engaged in criminal activities such as illegal migration or the trade in people. In 1997, out of 100 workers imported from Vietnam to a textile factory in the Moravian town Zlín, 98 disappeared directly from the airport after landing. Probably, they stayed illegally in the Czech Republic or were transferred further to the West [22: 193]. In recent years, the Czech organisation La Strada has been registering the cases of women transported to the CR by these agencies and then forced into prostitution. The young women (one of them was just 14 years old) were promised jobs as accountants, waitresses, workers in restaurants, etc. and informed about the price of transfers being around 5000 USD. In some cases, they signed fake contracts “ensuring” them salaries of 700 to 1000 USD per month. After they arrived in the CR, the monetary amounts demanded for transfers grew to 12 000 USD and the women were forced to “pay debts” as prostitutes in conditions resembling those of slavery [27: 28].

The numbers of new emigrants grew substantially from the moment when some Czech private lawyers started to engage in lucrative work for the Asians.

Patterns of “illegal” immigration and transfers of people

Together with the exploitation of gaps in the Czech and European legal systems, the transfers are realised on illegal principles as well.

The use of counterfeit documents is frequent. It includes the use of counterfeit visas, the use of stolen and illegally sold passports with alterations from Western countries (in the Czech Republic, these passports are of German or Belgian origin), and so on. Especially in the last decade, the practice of “selling an identity” is common among the members of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. A Vietnamese who decides to return home can sell his complete identity, i.e. his passport, visa, business licence, etc., to a newcomer. The newcomer can then start his own business very quickly.²⁵

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ CPS: interview K. F., an officer of the Útvar pro odhalování organizovaného zločinu Policie ČR (The Czech Police Organised Crime Unit), 11 October 2007.

Smuggling people across the “green line” (illegal crossing of borders) was frequent in the 90s and still continues with a lower intensity. The Czech Republic has been a destination and a transit territory for transports of Asian migrants to the West. One of the most frequent patterns of illegal transfers of Vietnamese emigrants is that the emigrants travel by airplane or by train to Russia, and then they travel hidden in trucks across Ukraine to Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The trip takes two or more months and the price for the transfer usually ranges from 5000 to 6500 USD.²⁶ The living conditions of the transferred emigrants are hard. Violence and even raping of women are not uncommon during the journeys.²⁷

As a rule, migrants from China and Vietnam (and also from Sri Lanka, India, Afghanistan, and, in specific cases, from other countries) come more or less legally to Moscow. There, they are brought to a “waterhole” (a flat in Moscow or its vicinity), where they await the next step, usually while being locked up and isolated. The next step comes when a sufficient number of migrants is collected: at that time, each migrant is placed into a group with other migrants, put into a car or other means of transportation and transferred to the next dislocation place [25]²⁸.

Mister H (25 years old, unmarried) was born in Nam Dinh, Vietnam. He worked in a small family firm as a plumber and repairer of air-conditioners. His father and brother are still working in the firm. H was earning 1 million Vietnamese dongs (approximately 70 USD) per month. It was sufficient for the basic nourishment of a four-member family but not for investments for the future. It was why mister H contacted the mediator with the help of one man from the vicinity whose son had been living in the Czech Republic for a long time. H's family had to pay 6500 USD for the transfer after his arrival to the Czech Republic.

The road took 6 months and its conditions were terrible. Mister H arrived in Moscow in a group of 30 other Vietnamese without any documents. They had to wait for a long time whilst their “guide” negotiated the “entrance fee” with Russian Customs officers. The Customs officers executed brutal personal inspections of the group's members because they were not satisfied with the offered bribe. Finally, when they did not find any more money, they let them go. After some time spent in Russia, the Vietnamese were transported in a truck to a place near the border with Ukraine. Then, when they got out of the truck, they had to cross the border by foot in the cold winter night. All of them were very lightly clothed. On the other side of the border, they were hidden in another truck and transported to a flat without a WC and a bathroom. They used pails instead. Their way then continued across Ukraine and Slovakia to the Czech Republic.

*Mister H currently stays in the country without the documents necessary to acquire a business licence or a permanent residence permit. He has to work illegally for Vietnamese companies. His living conditions are actually worse than they were in Vietnam.*²⁹

In the years 1990–2007, if the organisation was able to ensure the legal transfer of an emigrant to the Czech Republic, his way to Western Europe continued illegally

²⁶ CPS: interview H. T., Odbor azylové a migrační politiky Ministerstva vnitra České republiky (The Czech Asylum and Migration Politics Department, Ministry of Interior, Czech Republic), 2 March 2007.

²⁷ VCS (1997).

²⁸ VCS (2007).

²⁹ Trung Ta Minh (2002): 21.

only in its second part— mainly across the Czech-German borders. A Czech guide working for a Vietnamese smuggling gang or a Vietnamese guide led a group of immigrants to the vicinity of the border and showed them where to go. In the case of a bigger group, the guide led them across the line personally. Cooperating partners were waiting on the other side. The price for a transfer from the Czech Republic to Germany was in the range between 500 and 1000 USD.³⁰

It is estimated that approximately 10,000 Vietnamese illegally crossed the territory of the Czech Republic to Germany in the course of the 1990s.³¹ The routes from Germany to the Czech Republic were established as well. The Czech Republic has faced two strong Vietnamese migration waves from Germany after the 1989 revolution. In 1991, the German government decided to pay 3000 marks to Vietnamese workers imported during communist times in return for their returning home before the expiration of their contracts. Many of them accepted the sum but immigrated to the Czech Republic instead of coming back to Vietnam. The second wave arose in the mid-1990s, after the German and Vietnamese governments signed a repatriation agreement. Consequently, many “German” Vietnamese who were in Germany illegally emigrated from Germany to the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Netherlands, Russia, and Canada. They still live mainly in areas near the German border (Cheb, Potůčky) and in Prague. Many of them still speak German better than Czech.³²

Mister K lives in the city Cheb near the Czech — German border. He is a private trader in the biggest local Vietnamese market. He has a girlfriend and a ten-year-old daughter attending a local school. Formerly, he was a construction worker in Vietnam and participated in the building of a big dam. Later, he was selected to work in the German Democratic Republic on the basis of the German-Vietnamese agreement. He finished his contract in Germany at the beginning of the 90s and was given 3000 marks as compensation. He returned home, but he was not able to find a job there and faced economic problems. Afterwards, he decided to return to Germany, where some of his Vietnamese friends still lived. He paid 2000 USD for transit to Germany across Russia to a smugglers’ organisation, but they cheated him. The guide in Russia asked for an additional 1000 USD from him for further transport. He had no money and had to stay in Russia illegally. He was selling small amounts of goods in metro and train stations, constantly harassed by police asking for “special payments” and running away from them. After one year, he collected a sum sufficient for his way to Germany.

*After arriving in Germany, K has lived in an asylum house and was selling cigarettes on streets and in markets. After one month, he had problems with local Vietnamese who already had their own separate areas for trade in the city. He was arrested by the German police and then, afraid of repatriation, escaped to the Czech Republic. He crossed the border assisted by some man to whom he paid 100 German marks.*³³

³⁰ CPS: interview T. S., an officer of the Útvar pro odhalování organizovaného zločinu Policie ČR (The Czech Police Organised Crime Unit), 16 September 2002.

³¹ CPS: internal report of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit prepared for the IIR’s research project “International Organised Crime in the Czech Republic” (1999 – 2002), May 2001.

³² VCS (2007).

³³ Trung Ta Minh (2002): 22–23.

The leaders of smugglers' organisations were Chinese and Vietnamese individuals assisted by local people — Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Germans, etc. The local assistants are frequently connected to criminal underworlds. The most active among such organisations in the Czech Republic was the Eastern Branch Group (the nickname given to the organisation by the Czech Police) at the period—the network organising the smuggling of people from Vietnam and China through Moscow, Prague and the Northern Czech town Most to Germany, France (there was a second centre in Paris) and Great Britain. The organisations' chief is an ethnic Chinese probably living in Moscow.³⁴ The famous Dover tragedy of June 2000, in which customs officers found the dead bodies of 58 suffocated Chinese illegal migrants in a truck going to Great Britain, was connected with the organisation [22: 210 – 212].

In January 2008, when the Czech Republic joined the Schengen security system, its border was opened in all directions. The main activities connected to the smuggling across the “green” line moved from the Czech-German border to the external borders of EU in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The Czech Republic has been facing only secondary transits from the date.³⁵

The effect of both types of transfers (“legal” and “illegal”)

The Czech Foreign Police Department approved 3,407 permanent residence permits for Vietnamese citizens in 1995; in 1997, there were 17,620 residence permits for Vietnamese citizens. According to police estimates, the real number of Vietnamese residents in the Czech Republic was two times higher at the time.³⁶ Actually, the Vietnamese represent the third biggest community of immigrants in the country after Ukrainians (103,000) and Slovaks (58,000) [4]. According to official statistics, 40,779 Vietnamese residents were legally living in the Czech Republic at the end of 2006 [1], and 45,023 at the end of June 2007. Only 802 of these Vietnamese were Czech citizens. The rest stayed in the country on the basis of long time residence permits (13,370) and permanent residence permits (31,653).³⁷

The number of illegal Vietnamese immigrants is hard to estimate. The sources from the Vietnamese community speak of 10,000 illegal residents;³⁸ the police sources estimate 25,000 illegal residents [27: 17].

Civilian and criminal branches in the life of Vietnamese diaspora

Civilian branch

In the Czech Republic, the Vietnamese community life concentrates around market halls. In these market halls, there are mediator, consulting, and interpreting agencies

³⁴ CPS: interview M. K. and T. R., officers of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 4 June 1999.

³⁵ Interview M. D., the General Directorate of Customs, Department of Investigation and Supervision, Prague, 20 February 2008.

³⁶ CPS: interview M. K., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 27 May 1999.

³⁷ CPS: unpublished internal report, the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit. Based on the expertise of the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, November 2006.

³⁸ VCS (2007).

specialising in dealing with Vietnamese emigrants and Vietnamese restaurants, discos, sports activities and hobby groups. Vietnamese journals are issued there, and Vietnamese books and journals are sold there. Vietnamese children spend a lot of time after school with their parents there. It is a specific world with its own interests, a complicated network of mutual relations and its own unwritten laws.

Mutual ties exist not only in the single countries but also across borders. Vietnamese communities in the Czech Republic are strongly bound not just to Vietnam but to the communities in Germany, Poland and other countries as well. The ties include not only those of economic and cultural cooperation but those of cooperation in the sphere of criminal activities as well.

One feature typical for many Vietnamese residents (mainly the older generation) is that they consider their life in the Czech Republic as temporary and speak about their final return to Vietnam.³⁹ Some Vietnamese really come back home after several years when they collect the sufficient amount of money.

The goal to earn money as soon as possible and the sense of “transitoriness” mirrors in the professional structure of the Vietnamese resident in the Czech Republic. 26,189 Vietnamese (95 % of all economically active Vietnamese in the CR) have Czech trade licences. It is the biggest amount of trade licences for any foreign resident group in the country. Only 1 % of all economically active Vietnamese work in professions such as those of physicians, technicians, teachers, scientists, etc.⁴⁰ The Vietnamese usually prefer business even if they have a university education in the humanities or a technical field; and sometimes, their business is realised regardless of the limits of the law.

On the other hand, it is evident that the feeling of “transitoriness” is fictive in many aspects. Many Vietnamese reside for three decades in the Czech Republic, and they establish business firms and families there (they sometimes even establish a new family in the Czech Republic when they already have a family in Vietnam). There also exists a group of Vietnamese who returned home to Vietnam after their stay in the Czech Republic but were not able to readapt to their former lifestyle, found their family ties broken, felt uprooted in the neighbourhoods, where people considered them to be “parvenus”, etc. Some of them came back to the Czech Republic.⁴¹

As usual, the returnees leave their firms to family members in the Czech Republic or to young relatives newly arrived from Vietnam. These newcomers frequently maintain social relations established by their predecessors.⁴² The phenomenon of selling businesses (and identities as quoted above) together with business contacts is also widespread.⁴³

As a whole, the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic is young, with 21 % in the age group of 14 years and younger. Vietnamese children attend Czech schools and don't feel strongly tied to Vietnam.⁴⁴ The life in the Czech Republic is not a

³⁹ VCS (2007).

⁴⁰ CPS: unpublished internal report, the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit. Based on the expertise of the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, November 2006.

⁴¹ VCS (2007).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Brouček, S. (2002): 23 – 26.

temporary phase for them. They call themselves “bananas” — it means that they have “yellow” skin but are “white” inside”.⁴⁵

Although the Vietnamese diaspora appears to be homogenous at first sight, it is far from the truth. As a result of historical and social developments, three different social groups of Vietnamese residents were established in the Czech Republic:

- Poorly established newcomers called *gà* (“poultry”, meaning bumpkins) or *thóc* (“grain of rice”, meaning poor farmers), who arrived mainly after 2000.
- Immigrants who arrived after the democratic changes at the end of the 90s and are already economically and socially established in the country.
- Old settlers called *xù mốc* by Vietnamese (*xù* is a local name of Czech Vietnamese and *mốc* means “mouldy”).

According to a representatives of the Vietnamese Union in the Czech Republic, 10 Vietnamese citizens arrive by airplane to the country with help from some agency daily. The new emigrants possess only trade visas, which don’t permit them to be officially employed as workers, and they lack a sufficient amount of money for food, accommodation, etc. Approximately one thousand of these people live only in Prague.⁴⁶ The majority of them begin their stay in the country as illegal workers in Vietnamese or Chinese manufacturing workshops, as cooks or waiters in Asian restaurants, as street dealers of goods, etc.⁴⁷ They are *gà*, men on the bottom of the Vietnamese emigrant hierarchy.

There exist visible differences among the members of the lowest level. The new emigrant, together with the cost of transfer, has to pay for accommodation, food, and commodities to sell, the selling place, etc. These expenses are high. For example, the price of the selling place in a market hall ranges from 200,000 to 300,000 CZK (7000 – 11,000 euros). The monthly lease of the market place costs around 25,000 CZK (900 euros).⁴⁸

Basically, a new emigrant has three possibilities to cover the expenses: to collect money independently with the help of his family members living in Vietnam, the Czech Republic or abroad, to collect the sufficient sum as an illegal worker, and / or to start doing business “on debt” with money and goods borrowed from Vietnamese businessmen.⁴⁹ The conditions of these loans and contracts to work almost as a slave are usually tough. The contracts last several years. If the sellers are not able to make their payments regularly, the bosses seize their goods. If this is not enough, other types of pressure follow — beatings, rapes of women, kidnappings of children, and finally assassinations. Under such pressure, often in an effort to merely cover their debts, a lot of Vietnamese emigrants are turning to more lucrative activities beyond the limits of legality — trafficking in drugs, weapons, cigarettes ... or performing other services for criminal groups. It is quite easy to distinguish between sellers “on debt” and independent sellers in the markets. The sellers “on debt” work longer, occupying not so lucrative (and therefore expensive) places, etc.

⁴⁵ VCS (2007).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ CPS: interview K. F., officer of The Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

⁴⁹ VCS (2007).

The independent sellers and businessmen — independent emigrants and emigrants with covered debts — create the middle class of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. They are achieving an average level of comfort and a more or less independent status. They have a tendency to move from streets and market halls to permanent shops. Frequently, they hire Czech citizens as sellers, guardians and nurses.

These people are highly interested in gaining Czech citizenship (more specifically, a Czech passport permitting access to other EU countries without visas). Sometimes, this is done through fake marriages of Vietnamese emigrants to Czech citizens, frequently to members of the Roma community. The price of such a marriage ranges from 30,000 to 150,000 CZK (1000 to 5000 euros). It is interesting that a considerable part of these "shadow wives" are in contact with their Vietnamese husbands (even if they are not living together sexually) and are sponsored in the course of the marriage — they receive a part of the profits, participate as a partner in the "business" or are paid on the basis of concrete services.⁵⁰

Another recently used pattern has been the registration of Vietnamese emigrants as "fathers" of unmarried mothers' children in the Roma community. The price of one registration ranges from 20,000 to 30,000 CZK (cca 750 – 1100 euros). The number of such registrations crossed the line of a thousand cases. The "service" has been organised by Czech agencies. In all of these cases, nobody informed the Vietnamese "fathers" about their new obligation to pay alimony [27: 34].

The better-established emigrants have been establishing financial support for their families in Vietnam as well. Typical for many of them is that they have been serving as a base for other Vietnamese immigrants — members of their families or village communities, newcomers from their native districts. In the light of these facts, collecting money and sending young men and women to the West looks like a "good investment for the future"⁵¹ from the side of the families and village communities in Vietnam. In the Czech Republic, we see a tendency to establish business companies and special-interest groups composed of members of the same family or natives of the same provinces.

Mid-level businessmen are gradually enlarging their activities, sometimes becoming wealthy men — owners of markets, export-import companies, restaurants, and, in several cases, "bosses" and "financiers".

The Vietnamese boss

The Indochinese village mentality pattern is based on a superstitious belief that the emigrant community's internal mechanisms are able to bring about the solution of problems more quickly and efficiently than communication with state security forces. The superstition was exported abroad. The police in the Czech Republic often meet with the affirmation "Don't worry, we will deal with the problem ourselves" from the side of Vietnamese community members in the course of a criminal investigation.⁵² In most cases, it is true.

⁵⁰ CPS: interview J. S., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 8 August 2007.

⁵¹ VCS (2007).

⁵² CPS: interview M. K., officer of the *Útvar pro odhalování organizovaného zločinu* Policie ČR (The Czech Police Organised Crime Unit), 27 May 1999.

The mechanism of the solution of a problem is usually the following: a man whose interests have been damaged turns to a “respectable man” with a request for help. The “respectable man” would be able to help him in exchange for “gratitude”, expressed financially, in services or, in many cases, morally, with the expectation of a possible counter- service to the “respectable man”. It can be a businessman to whom he has economic or social bonds or some other important person.

X is a middle-aged graduate of a Czech university with a PhD. degree and the owner of an exclusive restaurant in Prague. His connections reach up to the circles of the Czech economic elite (where he is considered to be a serious and skilful businessman) and the political-economic elite in Vietnam as well.

He started his studies in the Czech Republic on a government stipend during the communist era. After 1989, he stayed in the Czech Republic and went into business, employing his former university professor (a woman) as an assistant. At the beginning of the 90s, he was imprisoned for illegal cigarette dealing together with his friend Y —the last Vietnamese chairman of the leftist International Student Federation. Both men were released because of a lack of evidence. Y returned to Vietnam, where he became a member of the political elite. He has been one of leading figures of the Vietnamese diplomatic mission in ASEAN.

X is able to communicate with the Czech offices on one side and has close contacts with the Vietnamese and Chinese underworld on the other. He organises the import and distribution of goods to the Czech Republic and immigration from Vietnam. In many cases, he was suspected of working as a “banker” and financier of illegal activities. X frequently travels across the East-Central European Countries and to Austria and Germany. He is an “honourable man” with great power, working as an arbiter of quarrels. He is considered to be a person able to find the solution to any problem by members of Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic, many of whom are grateful to him, ready to work for him if asked for a counter-service [18: 23].⁵³

In the first half of the 1990s, the boss was usually a former student of a Czech university fluent in the Czech language, with a good social and economic background in the country from communist times. The Vietnamese graduates of the Czech Military Academy in Vyškov dominated among them.⁵⁴

From the second half of the 1990s, Vietnamese businessmen, owners of big market halls, the majority of them coming from Central Vietnam after 1990, started to play the role of “respectable men”. The merging of legal activities and various criminal business activities is typical for them.

Becoming a “respectable man”, frequently addressed as *bac* (“uncle”) in the Vietnamese community, is not just a question of wealth. It is a question of real power as well. The power is ensured through a network of assistants. The network includes a circle of close confidantes (usually long-term collaborators and family members), administrators of market halls and companies, guardians, people with connections to the state administration (i.e. its corrupt employees), lawyers, and business partners. As a “respectable man”, the boss must dispose sufficient power to enforce his authority in cases of quarrels, arbitrages, and small violent struggles — or in any

⁵³ CPS: interview M. K., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 27 May 1999.

⁵⁴ CPS: interview K. F., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

problems connected with the life of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. This is why he is in frequent contact with the criminal underground.

Y is the owner of 50% of the company controlling the biggest Vietnamese market hall in Prague and of many smaller Vietnamese market places in Central Bohemia. Y's two partners share the other 50 % of the company. Y and his partners employ several men on a lower level of the company's management as administrators of market halls and chiefs of export — import departments— but also as men with good contacts with the Czech state administration and as men with reputations for being strong individuals in the Vietnamese criminal underworld. These people further engage Vietnamese and Czech workers and bo doi (“mercenaries”) for illegal activities.

Y's company is engaged in legal business, but together with it, it develops criminal activities in the spheres of the illegal importation of commodities with fake brand names, Vietnamese immigration, and sometimes even violent crime.

Y has great respect in the Vietnamese community because of his wealth, business success, power, and ability to find solutions to problems. Vietnamese emigrants in trouble frequently turn to Y with requests for help. He then authorises some of his adjutants to handle the problem. The adjutant contacts some members of the corruption network in a state office to arrange necessary documents and licences or hires bo doi for contract killings, kidnappings, and other enforcement activities. He also announces the price for the service to the emigrant and collects the sum. What is typical is that Y never directly accepts money for the service— just thanks and expressions of gratitude, sometimes accompanied by more or less symbolical presents from the emigrant. As usual, Y doesn't communicate with soldiers directly but through his adjutants. In less important cases, the emigrant can turn directly to the adjutant or bo doi and they can operate independently of the boss.⁵⁵

This is an important reason why the police investigation of Vietnamese violent crime is difficult: because of usually unclear relations between the *bo doi* in the field, i.e. the men directly connected with a concrete crime, and the interests and bosses behind the crime. The indirect connection is the reason why a “respectable man” can have characteristics of a man honoured in the Vietnamese community and characteristics of a criminal boss at the same time.

Actually, as in the case of X and Y, we see efforts made by the important bosses to separate themselves from direct connections with openly criminal activities and to work more as “financiers” and bankers of concrete criminal operations, to present themselves as successful businessmen in relation to the Czech community and as “respectable men” in relation to the Vietnamese community.

There exist three important Vietnamese companies merging legal and illegal activities in the Czech Republic. They control areas of the Czech cities Praha, Brno, and Cheb and have shares in business activities in Poland.⁵⁶ Their heads are considered to be “respectable men” in the Vietnamese community.⁵⁷

Together with them, a range of smaller and less organised independent Vietnamese criminal-business companies operate in the country. Their chiefs are

⁵⁵ CPS: interview K. F., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

⁵⁶ CPS: interview K. F., the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

⁵⁷ VCS (2007).

successful businessmen having sufficient financial sources and contacts with offices. In some cases, they are former *bo doi*. As usual, they have only a few adjutants and contacts with only 2 or 3 *bo doi*. Similarly to big bosses, they combine legal and illegal activities. For example, a legal importation of textile and tobacco merged with an illegal production of cigarettes with fake brand names is typical for them.⁵⁸

Bo doi and criminal gangs

The criminal delinquents stand at the bottom of the Vietnamese criminal hierarchy. They are usually involved in such independent criminal activities as robberies, extortion, burglaries, etc. together with special work as *bo doi* for the Vietnamese criminal bosses.

The *bo doi* are recruited from the environment of unsuccessful emigrants, juvenile gangs, and criminal delinquents penetrating to the Czech Republic from Vietnam through the immigration channels from the 80s. Another source of such criminal delinquents is the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. They know very well the world of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic, whose members are often targets of their criminal interests, very well.

We meet with a certain principle of circulation in connection to the Vietnamese criminal delinquents. When the soil in some country becomes too hot for some of them, and their faces become too well known, they change their country of residence, often with a “recommendation” for a criminal boss in the new country — contacts between criminal groups in various countries are numerous. Some of them have changed their country of residence several times in the course of their careers. The Vietnamese *bo doi* (mainly contract killers) are sometimes hired for special work from abroad.

The respectable man does not necessarily employ *bo doi* on long-lasting contracts — in most cases, their only regular employees of this sort are their personal bodyguards — but thanks to his contacts, he is usually able to hire them for concrete special assignments as guardians of market places, enforcers, and even contract killers. Instead of a regular job and salary, they are repaid with favors and / or single payments for specific acts. For example, a profitable shopping place on the market is offered to some *bo doi* and then they are paid just for their concrete actions.

Bo doi operate independently or with the assistance of several “colleagues”. The structure and activities of these groups vary. They range from groups exclusively created for single acts of violence to stable groups permanently engaged in criminal business activities. Vietnamese gangs in the Czech Republic are generally less organised but highly violent and involved in a wide range of criminal activities — extortion, theft, contract killing, smuggling of people, drugs. They are often identified with Vietnamese organised crime as a whole, which is not really the case. They are merely a part of it.

Black Son’s group represents the type of gangs created by “local” Vietnamese who have been living in the Czech Republic for a long time and new immigrants to the country from Vietnam. It specialised in violent crime. Its activities in another types of criminal business were occasional and temporary.

⁵⁸ CPS: interview J. B., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 4 September 2007. VCS

Black Son is a former Vietnamese worker who came to the Czech Republic in the second half of the 80s (probably 1988–1989). He obtained a permanent residence permit on the basis of marriage with a Roma girl and has a child with her. He wore expensive clothes and drove a high quality car. His group of Vietnamese delinquents (not more than 10 persons) was active in a large spectrum of violent criminal activities typical for Vietnamese gangs. He was not developing any business activities. At the beginning of the 90s, Black Son's gang emigrated to Germany and have "worked" in France, probably on contract for Asian bosses. When the police pressure started to be too high in 1995, the gang immigrated back to the Czech Republic. From 1995, Black Son worked as the chief of guards of the Vietnamese boss Minh Tho ("Minh the Ugly"). His group counted approximately 4 – 5 members at the time. In 1996 – 1997, Son was engaged in a war between the owners of two rival Vietnamese market halls in Brno. In 1997, he was seized by the Czech Police and sentenced to prison for creating and using forged documents. His alleged participation in violent crimes was not proven. A part of the members of his gang probably created a new group, and the rest of them dispersed. Black Son was released the following year. He avoided expulsion from the Czech Republic and a forced return to Vietnam and lived in the Czech Republic illegally using the passport of his brother. Occasionally, he traded in cigarettes, people, etc. In 2000, he asked for political asylum in the Czech Republic but escaped from asylum centre early in the process. After some time, he succeeded in gaining a residence permit with the help of some friends [22: 201–203]. Recently, he has again been active as a bo doi.⁵⁹

Especially in the second half of the 90s, the activity of criminal delinquents coming from the West European countries and the U.S.A. grew in importance. The majority of them were Vietnamese criminals pushed out of Germany after the German police began extensive operations against Asian crime. Their arrival led to a wave of violent clashes for spheres of influence between old Vietnamese criminal underworld members and newcomers. Currently, the situation is more or less stabilised and mutual relations are settled.

The group Xuan — Son (named according to the names of its two leaders) was composed of approximately 14 people, plus a greater unknown number of assistants from the Vietnamese community. In the years 1994 – 1996, the group operated in Germany, mainly in the area of Leipzig, Dresden, and Berlin. Its main activities were trading in cigarettes and the paid protection of Vietnamese street sellers. In 1997, a part of the group's members migrated to the Czech Republic. They henceforth co-operated with their partners in Germany in the spheres of the weapons trade, the drug trad , and violent crime (including contract killing). In the second half of 1998 and the first half of 1999, the Czech police seized eight members of the group. Its chiefs Xuan and Son moved from the Czech — German border towns Cheb and Most to Brno, where they disappeared among the numerous members of the local Vietnamese community. Afterwards, they spent three months in Hungary as contract enforcers.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ CPS: interview K. F., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 11 October 2007.

⁶⁰ CPS: internal report of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit prepared for the IIR's research project "International Organised Crime in the Czech Republic" (1999 – 2002), May 2001.

The Flying Dragons group represent a more developed violent gang engaged in criminal business.

*The gang of the Flying Dragons was probably organised by one or more former members of the American Flying Dragons operating in New York's Chinatown who immigrated to the Czech Republic. The gang has created a network of small subgroups distributed across the Czech territory — one member of the Flying Dragons was operating in Cheb, a town situated near the Czech-German border, and others operated in Varnsdorf, Prague, etc. Each member of the gang has organised small groups, which control certain territories and parasite on Vietnamese merchants [18: 26].*⁶¹

Representatives of the gangs coming from the post-communist countries are gangs engaged in smuggling goods and people to Western Europe. The gangs of this type are not dominantly violent, although they do not hesitate to use force. Engaging in some special types of activities and frequent work on temporary contract for bigger Asian groups or criminal bosses are typical for them.

Vuong Van Vu's group immigrated to the Czech Republic across Slovakia. Along with smuggling people, it was engaged in organised prostitution and other activities of that sort. It was based in the western Czech town Karlovy Vary.

The Khac Dan's group have worked for a long time on contract to the Eastern Branch Group (described above) as part of a smuggling chain specialising in the illegal transfer of people from the Czech Republic to Germany [18: 27].

A special criminal group in the Vietnamese underworld are the drug dealers. The number of drug addicts has been steadily increasing among members of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. *Bo doi*, workers, and street sellers under social pressure are turning their attention to drugs. From the beginning of the 90s, growing engagement of Vietnamese in the drug trade has been registered in relation to this phenomenon. Some former street sellers of goods and former workers have turned their attention to the drug business as a rich source of income. Although the Vietnamese drug dealers are still suppressed by the competition of other (Kosovo Albanian, Arab and Czech) traffickers in drugs, their activities are accelerating mainly in the Asian community. As usual, they operate in small houses, flats, rooms in karaoke bars, etc., where consumers mainly from Asian communities can buy and become addicted to drugs.⁶² The drug dealers are considered to be “trash” in the Vietnamese criminal underworld.

Juvenile gangs represent another special group of criminal delinquents in the Vietnamese community. Their members, usually second generation Vietnamese young people, are concentrated around discos and nightclubs. They are engaged in small-scale crimes such as drug dealing, theft, and violent quarrels among gangs. The juvenile gangs usually stay out of professional criminal networks but their members are occasionally recruited as *bo doi* (and consider this position as prestigious).⁶³ Their structure and modus operandi are more similar to the Western street gangs of juvenile delinquents than to the “traditional” Vietnamese gangs.

⁶¹ CPS: interview M. K., officer of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 27 May 1999.

⁶² CPS: interview V. M., Anti Drug Headquarters of the Czech Republic Police, 11 November 2007.

⁶³ VCS (2007).

Activities of the Vietnamese crime organisations

We can differentiate between the following main Vietnamese criminal activities in the Czech Republic:

Economic crime

Frequent — connected with violations of intellectual property (trade in goods with fake trade marks and illegal copies), illegal production of and trade in commodities (alcohol, cigarettes), violation of customs and tax laws, money laundering, illegal financial transactions and transfers of money (including smuggling of cash and the hawalla system), etc. (3695 criminal offences registered by the Czech police between 1997 – 2006).

Semi-legal and illegal transfers of people

Members of the Asian community (Vietnamese and Chinese) are the main perpetrators of this offence. The actual trend is toward enlarging numbers of “clients” — i. e. refugees smuggled from Central Asia, Southern Asia and the Balkans (frequent).

Violent crime

Racketeering, extortion, kidnapping, enforcement activities, including contract killing (1997 – 2006: 696 criminal offences registered by the Czech police).

Usury

Frequent in relation to the new emigrants.

Stealing of goods

It is mainly small groups of delinquents who perpetrate this offence (1997 – 2006: 559 criminal offences registered by the Czech police).

Trade in people, prostitution

Prostitution- mostly restricted to the Asian community. Trade in people — connected with transfers “on debt” and illegal work in the C.R. (1997–2006: 83 criminal offences registered by the Czech police).

Counterfeiting activities (credit cards, passports and documents)

Connected with illegal transfers of people and economic crime (frequent).

Trafficking in weapons

Sales of weapons in the local Vietnamese underworld. Illegal transfers of Czech weapons for Asian organised crime groups in Germany (not frequent).

Trafficking in drugs

Kosovo Albanian criminal networks are the main source of heroin for Vietnamese drug dealers (only 10 % of the drug is illegally imported from Southeast Asia); the local stimulation drug *pervitin* (metamphetamine) comes from Czech sources. Growing engagement of Vietnamese in the illegal production of cannabis with help from hydrophone techniques imported from the Netherlands (grows by addition).⁶⁴

Vietnamese — Chinese crime relations

It is frequently claimed that the Vietnamese are only able to perform “dirty work” for Chinese organised crime bosses. This is only partly true.

Employees of the Chinese embassy were the only Chinese present in the Czech Republic until 1989. Currently, there are approximately 9000 Chinese residents in the country.⁶⁵ Chinese organised crime is not strong in the Czech Republic. Beijing, Fujian and Wenchu organised crime groups are the most active there, mainly in the field of illegal migration and in the trade of goods with fake brand names [15: 68–69, 22: 214–217]. Chinese immigrants — and the Chinese organised crime groups — have started to employ Vietnamese at the beginning of the 90s mainly in the three spheres of their business: as interpreters, middlemen and specialists in the Czech Republic, as dealers of goods, and as practitioners of illegal activities. Gradually, the Vietnamese entered the Chinese big business. In many aspects, they are copying successful Chinese models. Although the structure of their groups is not so hierarchical and strong as in the case of the Chinese, we are seeing more and more Vietnamese top criminal bosses and groups operating independently and organising their own vast criminal networks. They are not simply the lackeys of Chinese organised crime. They became its partners instead.

At the end of 1997 and the beginning of 1998, some Chinese expressed interest in sharing profits from the lucrative illegal activities on the western Czech-German border, which were dominated by Vietnamese. Mutual tensions led to several killings in Western Bohemia, and the Chinese threatened to burn the biggest Vietnamese market in Prague (in Modřany). The disagreement was resolved by a meeting of Chinese and Vietnamese bosses in Prague. Both criminal underworlds have been coexisting more or less peacefully since that time [18: 28].⁶⁶

In general, we can characterise the Vietnamese criminal networks as younger or more primitive brothers of the Chinese criminal societies in many aspects. But actually, they are quickly developing and improving their organisational structure.

⁶⁴ CPS: internal report of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit prepared for the IIR's research project “International Organised Crime in the Czech Republic” (1999 – 2002), May 2001; unpublished internal report, the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit. Based on the expertise of the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, November 2006.

⁶⁵ CPS: unpublished internal report, the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit. Based on the expertise of the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, November 2006.

⁶⁶ CPS: interview M. K. and T. R., officers of the Czech Police Organised Crime Unit, 4 June 1999.

Conclusions

The research of the Vietnamese criminal networks in the Czech Republic proves that there is a need to expand our current thinking about the causes of organised crime and about the risks and vulnerabilities that may lead to the creation of criminal markets. There is also a need to better understand how those criminal markets operate in order to provide useful information for shaping strategies and tactics to disrupt them. Law enforcement officials need to do more thinking “out of the box” of traditional, mafia-like structures in order to effectively combat Asian crime. The distinction between the “traditional” Asian organized crime and the Asian crime networks, as discussed by Fickenauer and Chin [6: 19], provides a good base for it.

The dialectical unity of the legal and illegal spheres of life in Vietnamese communities is one of the main factors restricting efficient measures against Vietnamese criminality. It is misleading to attempt to view these two parts separately on the basis of European norms, or according to the European legal system.

Closely connected legal and illegal activities were symptomatic already for the Vietnamese criminal networks established in the former communist Czechoslovakia. In the course of the 80s, they developed from small-scale entrepreneurial activities in the field of imports and exports of goods and production of clothes from stolen textile materials into shadow businesses organised by state officials. One of the main factors of the future penetration of international Asian crime to the Czech Republic was the establishment of a strong Vietnamese diaspora before the Iron Curtain’s fall. The social changes of the end of the 80s only catalysed already started processes.

The merging of legal and illegal activities is symptomatic as well for the organisers of Vietnamese immigrants’ transfers to and across the Czech Republic’s territory after 1989.

The majority of them are unlicensed. A high flexibility has been typical for them. Especially in the 90s, they skilfully abused gaps in immigration laws on a “legal” basis when taking part in organising illegal transfers based on corrupting state officials responsible for immigration’s control, falsification of documents, and the “classical” smuggling of people across the “green line”. Typical for Vietnamese immigration agencies has been their ability to move softly between legal and illegal spheres, and to co-operate occasionally with the criminal underworld.

The agencies serve as shields of criminal organisations connected to smuggling of people as well. The leaders of these organisations are of Chinese and Vietnamese origin and are assisted by local people. Vietnamese criminal groups connected to the Czech criminal underworld serve as “local specialists” for Chinese smugglers’ networks, organising transports of people exclusively across the Czech Republic’s territory as well. They keep this role even after the Czech Republic joined the Schengen security system in January 2008 and the EU external borders were moved further to the East. Although the main portion of Vietnamese immigrants actually arrives by plane to the Czech Republic (to stay in the country or to continue to the West), there exists the threat that the illegal land transfers of immigrants to and across the country will grow in importance again, after more restrictive immigration laws and regulations were introduced.

The adoption of immigration laws according to the EU standards narrowed gaps in the legal system “traditionally” used by Vietnamese agencies for transfers of

immigrants to the country. Because of high interest in emigration in Vietnam, the agencies are looking for new ways to continue their business. One solution for them could be immigration organised in the framework of importing temporary labour forces. The demand for cheap labour forces is actually high in the Czech Republic because of quick economic development, and several agencies already applied for government licences to import workers from Vietnam. The rumours from the Vietnamese community speak about tens of thousands of people interested in travelling to the Czech Republic for a job.⁶⁷ The experience from the 80s and the beginnings of the 90s proves that the export of Vietnamese labour forces includes many risky factors for the national security and must be closely observed and regulated.

It is evident that the Vietnamese criminal networks in the Czech Republic have fully developed their organisation structure and *modus operandi* in the course of the 1990's and 2000's. They are deeply integrated into the life of the Vietnamese diaspora in the country, creating strong and efficient parallel power structures there. Some Indications that came out during the research suggest that they were probably able to efficiently penetrate the Czech state administration as well. Although the structure and the mutual relations of civilian and criminal branches are not as clear and visible in the Vietnamese community as in the Chinese, there exist many similarities between them. The "respectable men" play key roles in the communication of the branches, creating around themselves strong economic and social networks based on their economic power, their ability to enforce their authority by violent means, and their complicated client system of family, regional, and ethnic bonds. In this system, many Vietnamese emigrants who are basically without criminal backgrounds occasionally participate in criminal activities. On the other hand, criminal delinquents are involved in the networks, and they are tolerated by the broader diaspora's society because of this.

The Vietnamese crime networks are not restricted to one country but operate internationally. The opening up of the borders of the Czech Republic to Germany and Poland in 2008 did not bring changes, which would be as dramatic as expected. The rise of Vietnamese crime on both sides of the borders was low. It proved that the Vietnamese trans-border crime networks are already well established despite the former administrative restrictions, and closely tied. The opening of borders further facilitated the operations of the already established trans-border criminal networks and the expansion of their activities to other European Union countries. Because of this, the threat that the Czech Republic could become one of the important bridges of the penetration of Asian crime to the whole of Europe still exists. On the other hand, the expected import of Vietnamese crime not only from Asia but also from the other European countries represents the important security threat for the Czech Republic. A closer international security co-operation among the involved countries is needed in this situation.

The rise of criminal offences in the Vietnamese community indicates that the problem will grow in importance. Together with "classical" criminal activities such as smuggling people, selling people and prostitution, violent crime, selling drugs,

⁶⁷ VCS (2008).

etc., Vietnamese crime networks will focus mainly on economic and financial operations merging together legal and illegal activities in the future.

The investigation of these offences is still ineffective because of the difficulty involved in trying to penetrate the Vietnamese diaspora's community. It is evident that the national strategy of combating Vietnamese crime should include not only efficient legal, administrative and security measures but also strategies for "opening" the Vietnamese diaspora to communication with the broader Czech society. The Vietnamese residents still have a questionable position in the Czech Republic, characterised by prejudices, communication and culture barriers, frequent semi-legal and illegal residence statuses, a marginal and frequently illegal position on the labour market and in the national economy, etc. It pushes them under the influence of parallel power structures inside the Asian community and to crime networks. A national programme for the stabilisation of the Vietnamese diaspora should be created.

The frequently quoted "isolation" of the Vietnamese diaspora is fictive in many aspects. The actual situation in the Vietnamese community is different to the situation two decades before. What is possible to consider as a positive feature in its development is the tendency of a growing number of Vietnamese immigrants to adapt themselves to the Czech environment. These immigrants are attempting to isolate themselves from criminal networks (although a lot of them came to the Czech Republic through illegal channels and have cooperated with the underworld for some time), to pay state taxes, to send their children to Czech schools, and to create a permanent home for their families in the Czech Republic. Many former Vietnamese street sellers are moving to permanent shops.⁶⁸ The young Vietnamese are usually well adapted to the culture and society in the Czech Republic and don't feel too closely connected to the country of their parents' origin. The number of Vietnamese university students grew dramatically in the last three years.⁶⁹

Our research proves that the traditional "village mentality" and feeling of "transitoriness" have substantially weakened in the second generation of Vietnamese residents. The second generation is interested in interacting with the Czech environment. It gives them a chance to eliminate the role of parallel power structures and crime networks in the Czech Republic's Vietnamese diaspora.

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